11
The Participation Forum*

March 23, 1995

Topic: Customer Service Plans—What's New?

"Customer surveying," "customer service plans," "customer outreach": are these terms just "newspeak" for what we have been doing for years? This Forum session began by focusing briefly on several examples of innovative, energetic approaches to "customer outreach" and participation. Against this backdrop, the session focused on the question, "So why do we need 'customer service plans'?"

Presenters and other participants emphasized the value of making customer outreach a regular part of operations, of focusing more on the ultimate consumer, and of recognizing the right of the customer to hold us (and the various partners beween the customer and USAID) accountable for meeting standards to which we've committed ourselves.

Speakers included Sher Plunkett, Customer Service Officer; Diane Russell of USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (Nicodeme Tchamou, of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in Cameroon, assisted in the presentation); Cynthia Rozell, Mission Director for Malawi; Jim Anderson, Mission Director for Niger; and Paul Zeitz, Child Survival Technical Advisor in the Global Bureau's Center for Population, Health and Nutrition. Finally, Pamela Johnson, on loan from USAID to the National Performance Review, and Phyllis Dichter-Forbes, who leads USAID's reengineering effort, challenged the group to consider how setting customer service standards empowers our customers to influence our performance. Lively discussions and E-mail followed.—Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participatory Development.

Making Our Best Practices Part of the System

Sher Plunkett

"Customer focus," a "core value" in USAID's reengineering, is probably the most exotic term used to date for describing the most familiar and the most prized value for all of us working with USAID.

Customer focus as a part of reengineering has essentially two roots: first, the mandate provided by Executive Order 12862, September 1993, in which the administration mandated all federal agencies to develop customer service plans; and second, the traditional USAID commitment to deliver development assistance to poor people while achieving foreign assistance goals. The new mandate and our traditional

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The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel to explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to "build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved" ("Statement of Principles on Participatory Development," November 16, 1993). Guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. E-mail should be directed to Diane La Voy, using either the USAID directory or INTERNET, as DLAVOY@USAID.GOV. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development.

focus have twined together nicely as the agency attempts not only to reengineer internally, but also to convince the American people that what we do is meaningful and important to our overall foreign policy objectives.

The reengineering task force examined the term “customers” and determined that, in the USAID context, it meant the end users of our program services: the people whom we exist to serve. A complication for USAID is that our “ultimate customers” are often linked through a chain of intermediate customers. Mission people often tend to think of intermediaries, like counterpart ministries, as their customers, because that's who they deal with most. In fact, USAID's links to its customers are like those of the manufacturer to wholesaler to retailer to consumer. A customer service plan looks at the relationship of customer X to customers Y and Z and tries to determine what USAID can do to help or encourage customer X to reach customers Y and Z. Further, the plan also looks at customer Z—the end of the line—to find out if the services are wanted or being delivered or both. In other words, in customer service planning, each operating unit in the agency identifies its customers, traces customer linkages, defines the needs at each link, and analyzes service gaps between the promise and the performance, through systematic feedback.

USAID has tried to get at this before. The “New Directions” of the 1970s forced us to examine links down to the end users using techniques like social soundness assessments, social institutional profiling, and social marketing. These efforts were too low in the scheme of things, too little, too late in the process, and too marginal to the critical management decisions in our development assistance. Some say that customer service is what every good project officer does—pay attention to their people. That's true, but it's not currently systematic or institutionalized, and it's not sustainable, given mission turnover. Reengineering involves taking our best practices, including customer outreach, customer focus, and customer services, and making them part of the system. Customer service planning puts resources behind the “customer focus” core value.

Other aspects of the executive order include developing and monitoring service standards and reporting both to USAID and to the customers, saying, “This is how we think we're doing. How do you think we're doing?”

A Dialogue and Learning System

Diane Russell

Three years ago, I was a research fellow at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, which had opened a new humid forest station in Cameroon. Although we did not call our effort a “customer service plan,” my Cameroonian associate and I were in fact dealing with farmers as customers. Our goal was to create a dialogue and a learning system between scientists and farmers, which would lead to the design and adoption of better technology in the field. We used a number of different social science tools: a literature review so we could find out what people knew already about the wants and needs of the customer; interviews with different leaders and members of our society to identify critical issues, problems, and players; and later, focus groups. Only after these steps had been taken did we use formal censuses and surveys to give us some scientific understanding about the population and its needs.

After two years, I turned my job over to my associate, botanist Nicodeme Tchamou, and asked him to continue with the customer feedback loop that we had started by bringing farmers to the field to look at experiments and trying to get scientists out to the farmers.

Nicodeme Tchamou: I had a really hard time convincing the scientists to go to the farmers first and look at their priorities and problems. But it is necessary if we are to achieve the goal of creating adaptable technology for the farmers. One thing I did was to hire a woman as the fifth person on our staff. We were

four men, but out in the fields, women are responsible for weeding. My boss thought a woman couldn't stand such work, but I pointed out that the women farmers are out in the sun all day, anyway, weeding the fields. So hiring a woman was a way to build a relationship between farmers and researchers.

Asking Ourselves Whom We Weren't Talking To

Cynthia Rozell

When Diane La Voy talked about participation at the mission directors conference about a year ago, my reaction was that, in our plans for developing our country five-year plan, we had all the bases covered. I kept thinking, "Oh, of course we're doing that." Back in Malawi, our first reaction was again that we know what we're doing; we talk to people; we know what our customers want.

In our ag sector programs, for instance, we have a series of beneficiary surveys. We spend three months each year with beneficiaries to see what happens with their lives, and we repeat the process each year in the same villages to look at any changes that have occurred. In our democracy/governance programs and in our health programs, we go out to villages regularly and do serious focus group work to get feedback on what's working and what isn't. In addition, we have the demographic and health surveys which are important in showing what's happening in population and health. Finally, we have public and private sector committees that meet regularly, quarterly or twice a year, to track the objectives and the results under each of our program areas.

The new government of Malawi has set up another set of systematic consultations—a change after a 30-year history of little consultation. They've set up 11 poverty alleviation task forces, which mobilize just about every organized group in Malawi, including the donors, the government, the semi-government, and the private sector.

We were feeling pretty comfortable until we decided to look at the question differently and ask ourselves whom we weren't talking to. It didn't take us long to come up with a substantive, if not long, list of people who were important to the society of Malawi but were either not direct USAID beneficiaries or not people directly involved in our programs, people whom we had no systematic way of reaching. They were traditional leaders, tribal chiefs, village chiefs, religious leaders, retired people who might have been civil servants for 20 years or more. A problem was that none of the mission staff is fluent in Chichewa, the language spoken by most of them.

The solution—and this is probably not the right answer in every case—was to ask a Malawian, with whom we had a longstanding relationship, to help in drawing up a list of people across political party lines and traditional and modern sector lines. (He happened to be the newly elected vice president.) We called the list of about 20 people that he prepared for us the Senior Advisory Group and invited its members to participate during the Country Program Strategic Planning (CPSP) period.

For most of the mission people, this turned out to be one of their most rewarding experiences in Malawi. The group met three times during the CPSP. As concerned citizens, they were eager to participate, though there was nothing in it for any of them: no job, no funding. Their only concern was with what made development sense for their country. They contributed both a fresh view on priorities and a validation of what we'd been hearing from our other client groups. This group is being continued, now that the CPSP process is finished. Once every six months we will sit down and review progress on some of the strategies they helped us develop.

Niger Experiments with a Customer Survey Plan

Jim Anderson

As a country experimental lab, Niger is developing a customer survey plan as part of our effort to incorporate the four core values—customer focus, results orientation, participation, and teamwork—into the strategic planning process. Our aim is to make this more than a plan with a list of targets that can be measured. We want it to become a state of mind. We want our officers to pick up on where a customer survey is needed to address an issue that has come up in the context of implementing a program. Our staff must be sensitive to what is happening with their programs from the standpoint of participation.

The participation plan and its customer survey aspects will require us to reconfigure our human resources. We need staff with the skills to understand what is going on, to ask the right questions in the surveys, and to implement what has been learned. Practically speaking, we can't get by with 3/3 in French in Niger if this is to be a true participatory mission. We need people who know Africa, who know the Sahel, people with negotiating skills. I'm looking more closely at the criteria that we're using for selecting our U.S. direct-hire staff. I'm also using our Foreign Service national staff differently. They have more of the needed skills than do the Americans, and they will have to be permitted to do things that they are currently prohibited from doing.

We're moving from an ad hoc to a more systematic way of listening to customers. For example, we have a microenterprise project that provides investment funds to the rural areas, especially women, to finance modest activities like purchasing an oil press to enable them to make and sell peanut oil. If the money isn't forthcoming, these ladies—half the cooperative—will come into the capital city and sit on our doorstep telling us that we've got a problem. Now we've begun to use customer surveys to learn about these problems. And when the group feels we are being responsive, it creates a less confrontational operating style.

Participation in Designing a Child Survival Project

Paul Zeitz

The Process Explained. In Zambia, the child survival project design team I was part of in January and February had a tricky assignment: we were mandated to design a project that supported the country's health reform process and we also were trying to incorporate USAID's participatory or customer-oriented approach in our work. Zambia's reforms, which followed the 1991 elections, seek to devolve responsibility and resources to the district level. They have strong donor support; however, as with any radical reform process, there have been bumps in the road. Moreover, some Washington staff were concerned that a participatory or customer-oriented approach could jeopardize technical quality. There was also resistance within the mission and lack of experience with participatory design approaches.

We defined our ultimate customers as the people of Zambia, specifically the mothers and children. Our partners were health staff at all levels—local, district, provincial, and central—as well as nongovernmental organizations and private sector providers of services and child health commodities, and other multilateral and bilateral donors. Our core design team included full-time UNICEF representation and representation of nongovernmental organizations.

We started with key customer or partner and stakeholder interviews. This helped turn around many who had preconceived, negative views of USAID. We then held a child survival strategy workshop with the same partners, and again, they were surprised that USAID would openly discuss its comparative advantages and disadvantages. Then, together with staff from the Ministry of Health, UNICEF, and NGOs, we spent two weeks in the field. We met with health officers and staff from the provincial level down to the local health facilities, and we also went to the community level. In some districts, we held focus group meetings with community leaders and village representatives; in others, we just walked into the village and had local translators help us talk with community members. Once we talked with a group of mothers that were waiting for a vaccination session to start.

Proposed project outputs and indicators were developed and reviewed after the field visits, using logframing and involving a variety of partners and processes. All the partners then commented on the design and the proposed outputs at a project design workshop. We are planning for annual participatory monitoring and evaluation. This will give us the ability to redesign the project annually, which we need to keep up with the reform process in the government. This approach will replace the traditional midterm evaluation.

Pros and Cons of the Process. We have built up some goodwill, which should help us implement the project and develop country ownership of the child health program. I also believe that the technical quality of our design actually improved. We gained new insights from NGOs and other donors who had been working in the country for years. Whether sustainability will really increase remains to be seen. But we hope that the process leads to improved efficiency of donor resources and to genuine coordination and reduced duplication of efforts.

On the down side, the process took longer than usual and was therefore more expensive. A 10-person team spent a long time in-country, and meetings were professionally facilitated. There were delays in designing the project, and the participatory processes kept the technical team from comparing notes about our own perceptions and experiences. Dealing with such a large number of people was hard. Because our partners couldn't be involved in deciding funding allocations, there was a question as to whether the process was genuinely participatory. Similarly, although we had a lot of interaction in the field with district- and provincial-level staff, these staff were not really involved in the workshop decisions.

Another question is whether this approach can continue through project implementation. In our case, one experienced individual (HPN officer Paul Hartenberger) brought this process to Zambia. If it hadn't been for him, it probably would not have occurred. Finally, there is the lingering question about the technical direction, and therefore the quality, of the work. My opinion is that the results will be positive.

We're evaluating the process, taking a survey of our core team members and partners, with the intention of building the results into project implementation.

A Government-wide View of Customer Focus

Pam Johnson

From my stint at the National Performance Review, I realize that USAID has been ahead of the rest of the government in the participatory area. Only a handful of government agencies have had a clue about the kinds of tools that USAID has been using for years—focus groups and social marketing, for example. Nobody in the federal government has an assessment tool as valuable as the demographic and health surveys. USAID has built a knowledge base unique in the federal government. We have a tremendous amount to be proud of.

What I didn't expect to hear was validation of some of the things I've been working on at the NPR: the implications of what happens when you really start talking and listening to your customers; the discussions about the importance of the front line, the importance of missions, front-line action officers, front-line employees; and the need to go out and ask customers what they want.

This is exactly the same kind of thing we're seeing domestically, and I could tell lots of wonderful stories about it. For example, the IRS surveyed its customers—which we all are—and found things that surprised them and that they didn't even like to hear. They thought that if they were just friendlier and nicer, people would like them more. “Well,” people told them, “the less we hear from you, the happier we are.” They have taken this into account in their business plan and said, “How can we minimize the impact of our interactions—not make them friendlier and not have everybody have smiley faces?”

Challenges for USAID. One particular challenge for USAID is how to relate participation in project design and strategic planning to implementation. For example, what can the director of a health clinic do if a vaccination campaign is planned and the vaccine hasn't shown up? Who can he call? How many steps must he go through to get that vaccine delivered when and where it's needed? One of the reasons this customer image is so powerful is that we all interact as customers so often in our daily lives. For example, L. L. Bean wouldn't be selling too many plaid shirts if it told a customer trying to order a shirt in size M that he or she should call the Ministry, and the Ministry said to call the USAID office, and the USAID office had to send a cable, etc. Of course, L.L. Bean doesn't have 3,000 outlets; they have a centralized supply. The analogy suggests, however, that USAID must organize to be responsive to the needs of the front line.

Other countries are engaged in the same kind of effort we are. The United Kingdom has drawn up a citizens' charter for all of their government offices and has created *Charter News*, a service quality newsletter. Some 35 countries were represented at a conference in December 1994 on services to the citizen. Yesterday, I received a paper from the OECD on service quality initiatives that examines worldwide what's going on. The interest is all coming from the same place: fundamental erosion of trust in government; fundamental problems in terms of resources; new management styles in the private sector.

The NPR has put together a book of standards for serving the American people. It's the government's first collection of customer service standards. USAID is included in the chapter entitled “States, Localities, and Other Partners” because it resembles the federal government in that it too depends on partners—states, localities, and grantees—to deliver services. We and our partners are delivering services to the end users that we share.

Service Standards: Committing Ourselves

Phyllis Dichter-Forbes

Though I've heard a lot of positive statements about involving non-USAID people in the work that we do, I've not heard anything about the standards of a customer service planning process.

We've defined the customer of this agency as the end user, the ultimate beneficiary, the reason for which we exist. We've identified the U.S. PVOs, the Congress, OMB, and the various development groups as the stakeholders who, like the shareholders of a corporation, care a lot about what we do. They give us money to service somebody at the other end. If children don't get better educated, if mothers don't have fewer babies, if their children don't survive longer, if people in the rural areas are not getting richer, then theoretically we have no reason for existing. The presentations have suggested that it is very difficult to reach the end users. That is exactly what customer service plans are about—reaching such people both by direct contact and by ensuring that our grantees, bilateral or NGOs, do so.

It is obvious from today's presentations that USAID is asking people for their opinions. But have we started to systematically look at and codify the opinions so that something can result from them? What can we say has changed as a result of talking to the customers? What did we commit to? What do the customers know about the changes? For example, using the story about the district health person and the vaccines, would that person know whom to contact for the vaccines? Or even that he could make such contacts? I doubt it. Asking for opinions is important, but so is recognizing that the opinion you've asked for has validity and should be used in some manner. If it is worthwhile, it commits us to a change. In USAID, the Office of Procurement agreed to make noncompetitive awards within 90 days and competitive awards within 150 days. That's their customer standard. It's printed in a booklet. You can contact them if they're not doing it. That's a lot different than a procurement officer's simply saying to you, “I love you. I want to be a good procurement officer. I'm going to make your grants in 150 days.”

What about the customers of our services overseas? Whether they are direct customers or CARE's customers or the Ministry of Health's customers, are there sets of standards for serving them that allow them

to say, “You said I'm going to have a health service within 10 kilometers. I'm 15 kilometers from a health service, and it's been two years”? If we're supposed to be increasing child survival and mothers are telling us that it's hard for them to get to clinics, that they're uncomfortable with the way the clinics are organized, that they don't feel their children are getting good services, this is valuable information. We can use it to provide the right kinds of services at the right times to make more people feel comfortable.

Finally, we ought to be working with our grantees to ensure that they recognize the value of customer standards and are prepared themselves to conduct their own surveys.

Discussion Section

Addenda to Developing Service Standards

Diane La Voy: Phyllis has made clear that we haven't really emphasized standards. Now, I'd like to give the presenters a chance to come back a bit at her.

Jim Anderson: To add a point, we haven't given much thought to how host country officials and end users can take ownership of the process of participation. For example, if we are not getting the results we have targeted, we may need to shift resources. But it shouldn't be us, the donor, forcing that decision.

Paul Zeitz: Our process focused on partner involvement. To do what you're proposing, really getting in there with ultimate beneficiaries, would have been a lot longer and a lot more expensive.

Cynthia Rozell: You need to involve the end users in defining results, the standards. Once the customers have been involved, everyone who has a role in achieving the result must be part of the process. If people haven't agreed themselves to perform, whether it's a project or a program design or a strategic-objective result, they're not going to be committed to it. Setting up a system that allows the U.S. to provide drugs at a health clinic in Malawi may respond to a specific problem at a specific time in the fastest way possible. But the real challenge is to involve all Malawians who deal in drug procurement and to get their commitment to an end result. That is time consuming. But it's systematic change.

Phyllis Dichter-Forbes: How many people in this room have taken the recent survey by our Office of Human Resources? Are you going to feel that you really participated in the change process if people ask you questions, but a year later nothing really has changed out of it?

Gerry Britan: I'm reminded of how Joe Califano, when he was secretary of HHS, traveled around the country talking to people about the programs that the department funded. He had great information on how much money they'd sent to this district, how many people the program served. But he kept getting blindsided by his audiences, who would tell him about problems with service delivery or how the services weren't what he thought. He didn't know the answers. He needed to get into much closer touch with his customers. So he set up a series of what were called service delivery assessments to get a picture of what key programs were actually delivering across the country to people. He wanted to be able to show up in Chicago and have answers to people's questions.

Maybe that's the most basic thing we have to commit to knowing—at least to develop a standard for knowing what difference our programs are making among those at whom they are aimed. And when they're not making a difference, then feeding the information back into the decision-making process.

Identifying Truly Representative Advisory Committees

John Magistro: I have a question about involving advisory committees, as was done in Malawi. How could you be sure that the group that was identified was representative of the groups you were trying to reach?

Cynthia Rozell: That was a concern. But we weren't using any one advisory group as the final say in the end result. The issue is how to systematically bring all the opinions together. In Malawi we were pleasantly surprised to see the degree of agreement at the beneficiary level on what the priorities should be.

Learning to Listen, Learning to Reach Women

Diane Russell: Doing customer surveys may require learning to feel comfortable about asking questions, comfortable about being a little uncomfortable and not knowing what's going to happen—to take off the tie, throw away the briefcase, and sit for a while just listening to what people say.

Pat Martin: A cautionary note: for 20 years we've been working in women in development, and we're still not doing a good job of reaching women, of integrating them into the process. It's not easy. Nico's example was good. So was the comment about the importance of knowing the language and country in Niger. We're doing better. But we haven't approached this as systematically as we should.

Communications from the E-mail Bag

Credibility and Customer Expectations

John Grayzel: "Is USAID ready and capable of responding to its customers' inputs? The credibility issue is number one: For example, we do various community sessions and repeatedly the community brings up a relatively small project, like a water system, that is their first priority. Usually the priority could be responded to at a relatively minimal cost but the 'audit-correct' response is: 'Oh sorry, that is not in our mandate. Or even worse, 'We'll get back to you on that.' Result: Our credibility in empowering them is dead at the start. Another example: Our customers want lower transaction costs, but we are still raising the costs. Our smaller and more disadvantaged customers find the Agency's new rule that we can give only 30-day instead of 90-day advances a killer of a requirement. Result: Credibility dead. Somehow we must be prepared to be rapidly responsive both procedurally and programmatically to reasonable customer desires."

Maria Beebe: "How does a participatory process deal with responses that go beyond a project's parameters? How do we as an agency rethink some of the bureaucratic constraints that shackle our creativity? How do we avoid falling into a trap of 'asking' but not being able to respond or deliver? How do you 'survey' without 'raising false expectations'?"

Kristin Loken: "How do we open up local participation, especially on needs and problem-definition, without creating expectations that USAID programs will follow through on the priorities identified? Some ideas: Make customer surveying at the macro level more of an ongoing activity; combine efforts with other donors and local universities so that it is not so directly a USAID endeavor; wait for operating year budget (OYB) levels and then focus customer surveys within approved sectors and funding levels; include USAID/W people whenever possible to keep everyone informed and on board."

Diane La Voy: "I think we can get part of the way toward addressing the issues of heightened expectations. We should try to avoid setting up situations in which the basic question is, 'What do you need?' Instead, aim to get people's perspectives on the situations they face (e.g., what are the reasons that their daughters don't attend school?), on their priorities (what are they already doing or trying to do to address a problem), and on their satisfaction with the services or support they receive through USAID-backed programs.

"In doing this, it's important to be quite clear, among ourselves and with our various customers and partners, that we are not assuming that USAID (or any donor) can or should fill all the gaps that people identify. Rather, the idea is to ensure that all of us engaged in the development process—customers and partners—understand the situation well in order to make all of our efforts and investments as effective as possible. Doing some of this customer outreach (surveying) with and through host-country entities—including communities themselves—can sometimes help set up more realistic expectations."

Rewarding Results and Customer-Oriented Behavior

Lynellyn Long: "I like the customer service approach and consider the American taxpayer my boss. Having read a book on total quality management, I spent a lot of time during my last RFA (request for applications) ensuring that potential applicants had access to information and knowledge about the process. Given that a lot of nongovernmental organizations were not accustomed to working with us, the effort took hours. The payoff was a record number of exemplary applications.

"My reward was seeing successful, innovative programs that have received lots of publicity and kudos. Unfortunately, from within, our system is not designed to reward either those grantees or those who take this initiative. Only a few months later, I have watched all this set aside for larger political priorities.

"My comments/questions are: (1) How will incentives be structured in the current system to ensure that customer service-oriented behavior is rewarded? and (2) When will we as an organization be sufficiently empowered to set an agenda and move forward from start to finish?"

Sanath Reddy: "Accountability does not appear to be as simple as selling a product or maintenance contract to a customer. In development, success and lasting benefits depend on the customer's bringing to the table an input or behavioral change—his part of the bargain. Accountability is a two-way street. If we focus on impacts and results and we achieve them in large measure, I think the 'accountability' test will be answered."

Suggested General Approaches for Customer Focus and Participation

Frank Alejandro: "The methodologies and approaches we work on are experimental. During each presentation, I could not help but think of Odonna Mathews, Customer Service Rep. for Giant Food Inc., the supermarket chain. She and her colleagues followed a basic framework to put Giant Food on the map, and they almost tripled Giant shares in the past 15 years or so. This framework followed accepted principles, keeping the customer in mind:

- Identify the customer.
- Provide quality service, quality products, and a fair price: the customer is willing to pay for the service and the product.
- Find out how well you are responding to customer needs, through timely focus-group surveys and interviews (on-site and with sample products, if possible).
- Collapse survey data from representative samples of customers (in our case, missions with similar demographics).
- Report findings quickly to customer base or respond accordingly with better service (for the missions this would include responding fast with vaccines, loans, water, or other interventions identified by customers).
- Revisit the cycle and reidentify the customer base (as we all know, the customer never remains dormant, especially in development work)."

Maria Beebe: "Community-based participation must be planned or it will not happen. Planning and designing the priority-setting process should take place in collaboration with a multi-stakeholder group or planning team and involve the following:

- Define the level of participation, which will depend on the time and resources made available for planning and the size, composition, and diversity of the population and its institutional community.

- Define target communities and target groups, and include those traditionally underrepresented.
- Design the priority-setting process. Consider what activities, methods, and tools are appropriate to use with each group and the resources and time available."

"The multi-stakeholder group then implements the plan to consult, as follows:

- Conduct a general information campaign, including what to expect and what not to expect from the priority-setting exercises.
- Identify community issues, problems, concerns, and proposals for solutions. Consider surveys, community meetings, focus groups, participatory radio shows, mapping, etc.
- Analyze issues. Consider workshops, force field analysis, environmental scans, SWOT, etc. to allow for new information and extensive discussion among participants.
- Move toward consensus to selct a few issues for priority focus. At this point we should be ready to implement what the community has decided (within the parameters laid out during the planning process). We should NOT at this point say, 'We will get our consultants to design a project to respond to your priorities. It will take us six months to two years to get back to you.'"

Frank Pavich: "Recently, I proposed this two-step approach for clarifying the (Cairo) mission's 'Customer Focus': 1) Asking ourselves and our Customers (end-user beneficiaries) questions about Customer involvement, including 'How are end-users involved in our projects?' 'What do end-users know about the USAID project and what is expected of them?' 'What is the impact of end-user involvement?' and 'What lessons can we learn from analyzing this involvement and the USAID development process in which they are involved?' These questions are intended to start the process of systematic thinking about our Customers. Hopefully they will lead to more sophisticated approaches as they are discussed. 2) (The Mission's Participation Forum) will decide on the final list of questions to reach our Customer Focus objectives as well as methodologies to be used in finding the answers. We will also consult other Missions and Offices around the USAID world."

Recommendations

- **Favor Host Country Procurement**

Joseph Lombardo: "If participation is intended to increase ownership and sustainability, should we be looking more closely at policies that favor host country contracting and procurement, at least for procurements like vaccines that are expected to be recurrent needs beyond the life of the project? For example, procurement of vaccines will not end with the project but can be expected to become an element of the country's ongoing program. USAID may be able to procure commodities faster, but we are undermining the ability of the country to develop the business relationships with suppliers that the country will need beyond the next project life.

- **Focus on Customer Involvement during Implementation, Not Design**

Paul Hartenberger: "There is a point of diminishing returns regarding numbers of folks involved in a design process. In Zambia we had at least 125 to 150 persons. You can have all the grassroots participation in design you want, but if the end result or service is lousy, it's all for naught. I would build in participation during the implementation phase and consultation during the design process, to the extent that's feasible."

- **Support Missions' Customer Service**

Paul White: "Our strongest asset is our field missions. They are closest to the action, interact on a daily basis with our main customers, the people in developing countries, and are best able to understand the needs and identify appropriate development responses. Washington should be servicing the needs of field officers so that they can better serve beneficiaries in developing countries. Too often, Washington attempts to determine what should be done, how, over what time frame, and with which instruments. Washington should spend more time and effort learning how to support this customer relationship."

- **Incorporate Customer Service Plans in Standard Program Document**

Barry Burnett: "How would customer service plans be presented to Washington? As part of an operating unit's strategic plan, an element in the Results Review and Resources Request (R4) report, or as a separate document/presentation? I think that they should be incorporated in a standard program document. This would lead to better integration with the proposed or ongoing program."

Values of Participation

John Magistro: "I view the customer survey approach as a fundamental element of doing good anthropology. I am somewhat biased in believing that any good development work must involve extensive consultation with the 'end-user.'"

Tulin Pully: "The points that have emerged from Forum participants seem to be right on target. In Jamaica, we struggled with the same question, 'Why do we need customer service plans?' in our reengineering workshop and pretty much came up with the same points. We developed a draft customer service plan to make customer outreach a regular part of our operations and achievement of results. The plan will help us focus more on our customers rather than on the partners we are used to working with."

Shirley Hunter: "Direct involvement of our customers or end-users in our agenda will provide honest feedback on our accomplishments or lack thereof, enabling us to utilize our program funds more efficiently. We will be able to move ahead or retract an implementing activity on a timely basis, according to our customer response."

A Dissenting View: The "Customer" is the American Taxpayer

James Hester: "We are making a fatal error in defining our beneficiaries as customers. To use the term 'customer' and all that it implies for our beneficiaries, instead of the American taxpayers, misses the whole point of redesigning government. If USAID is to continue to exist, it has to be responsible to the American people because it is they whom we serve and it is their money for which we are being held accountable. Perhaps the term 'customer' is not well-suited to our situation. The standard definition of customer in the dictionary is 'one who buys goods or services.' Our programs are grants so there is no buying from the developing countries or even their citizens. So long as we offer, they will accept because they do not have the power of a paying customer to take their business to another company that can provide superior goods and services.

"The American taxpayers are buying increases in export markets, decreased threats to U.S. national security, and fulfillment of a personal sense of social responsibility to help those less well off. The crisis that USAID seems to be facing now is that these 'customers' are questioning whether they want to buy this anymore, and if so how much of which parts do they want to buy?

"I understand completely the essential need to work directly with our beneficiaries. Local public participation is so basic it is amazing to me that USAID did not do it to an even greater extent in the past, but that is not the point I am making here."

La Voy: "The commercial paradigm has its limitations, no doubt. Our customers do not themselves pay. But they are the reason we're in business. Levi Strauss would be out of business if it focused its energy primarily on preparing eloquent statements and reports for its investors. It's successful only to the degree that it can focus on the people who will wear its jeans.

"Feel free to replace customer with 'beneficiary' in your own thinking, as long as it leads you to participation of host country players not just in the sense of consultation, but engagement built on mutual accountability."

James Hester: "Participation from host country publics is essential to building quality international development widgets, which is a must if we are going to get American taxpayers to buy them, but if we don't simultaneously get the taxpayers fully participating in telling us what kind and how many they want us to produce, then they won't buy our widgets."